

The Book of Jeremiah

Jeremiah rips the packaging, hands quaking and breath drawn. His fingers feel nimble, like those of child tearing open a gift. The brown paper lies in shreds on the floor and Jeremiah clasps the thick volume, holding it at arm's length for the initial assessment. His eyes take a few seconds to focus on the title – it's all a bit surreal – but there it is:

Globalization and Crisis: Essays on the International Political Economy in Honor of Professor Jeremiah Gerstler's 80th Birthday. Eighteen essays – six of his own and 12 of his colleagues and former students – reflecting a lifetime of scholarship. A faint smell of glue springs from the spine, and he inhales with gusto. The pages are crisp, their edges razor-sharp. As soon as he clears the lump in his throat, he'll phone his editor to commend him on the final product.

Jeremiah's read and commented on all the articles, seen the galleys, and had one of his grad students proof them three times. The one thing he hasn't seen – Peter wouldn't let him – are the dedications at the front of the volume. "Trust me, you'll be pleased," the editor said.

"A Festschrift," Peter had said when he proposed the idea a little over a year ago.

"Get outta here," he'd replied, secretly thrilled but flinging his wrist to swat away the suggestion. This was an honor bestowed upon few academics; the pinnacle of an illustrious career. He wanted to run home to tell Molly. He'd contributed to other people's Festschriften over the years, and aside from one half-hearted mention by his department chair a few years back, no one had ever suggested one for him. "Usually

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they’re written on the occasion of a big birthday or retirement. And since I’m in between big birthdays, is this the University’s way of telling me to retire?”

Peter rolled his eyes and they’d bantered back and forth, Jeremiah insisting he didn’t want anyone fussing over him. The editor showed him a list of potential contributors. Ten minutes of weak protestations before he’d acquiesced. *The Book of Jeremiah*, Peter had taken to calling it. (“Oh, I hope not,” Molly’d said when he mentioned the nickname. “That’s all doom and gloom.”)

Jeremiah brews a cup of tea and parks himself in his reading chair, deliberately not extending the footrest. He wants to be fully awake to examine the volume, to savor its freshness. Pity his parents aren’t alive to see this moment. Though he could guess what his father might say: *Never mind the fancy honors*. Abe Gerstler’s accented English rings inside his head. *I just want my boy should be a mensch*.

There are four dedications in the volume, including “Reflections of a Daughter” by Hannah Gerstler, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of International Affairs at Williams College. He swells with pride every time he sees Hannah’s name and title. One written by Blackwell, the political science department chair, and the other two written by former students, one now a full professor at the University of Chicago and the other a fellow at a prominent DC think tank, two more points of pride.

Hannah’s dedication is lovely, a testament to his influence on her and on his field. He gets a clammy, sour taste in his mouth as he reads the others. *Feh!* They extol his research, mention the four times in his career he’s foreseen events or trends, but nary a one mentions his devotion to students, family, community, or anything remotely

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personal. A goldfish could have written more inspiring tributes. Perhaps, in his excitement, he’s missed the gratifying phrases. He skims the pages, seeking words and anecdotes to make him sound more likeable, not just someone with a “quick analytical mind” or “sharp intellect that’s transformed the field.” As a young, ambitious scholar, Jeremiah’d hungered for these neat words of praise. But he’s been in a more reflective mood lately, perhaps because he’s surpassed the age at which his father passed away.

Again he hears the voice: *What’s to expect? Es libt zich alain shemt zich alain. He who praises himself will be humiliated.* Though Abe, when he’d been alive, had boasted to his friends about “my son, the professor,” Jeremiah is convinced his father – a simple but generous, convivial soul who performed quiet acts of charity – never truly valued his son’s chosen profession. A life in medicine, or some other helping vocation, would have made his parents prouder.

Jeremiah rereads the dedications, and can’t shake the feeling of disappointment. A titanic letdown. He’s sure Molly will tell him he’s being too sensitive, but he can tell a lackluster piece of writing when he sees one. Or worse: these people were trying to say something nice but couldn’t. “Professor Gerstler is deeply committed to a correct reading of the sources. Woe to the student who comes to class unprepared or attempts a less-than-airtight analysis,” reads one dedication. “He demands rigorous standards of his students and does not tolerate academic laziness.” *These, you call dedications?* He wants to scream. *Woe to the student?* The underlying message is that Professor Jeremiah Gerstler, despite his academic achievements, is mercurial, volatile, and impulsive.

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Jeremiah heaves himself out of the recliner and hides the book in his desk, slamming the drawer shut. He wanders into the kitchen in search of some chocolate or a piece of his wife’s blueberry pie as a temporary assuagement. He comes face to face with an invitation hanging on the fridge to the reception in honor of the book’s publication. Molly will try to drag him, but there’s no way he’s going now. “Forget it,” he says aloud to no one. “Not on your life!”

Molly says he’s being “too touchy.” She takes her time reading the dedications, every so often glancing up to mention a nice phrase. “They’re not bad at all! I don’t understand why you’re so upset.”

He grunts. “You don’t get it. I’ve seen other Festschriften in my day. The dedications are much nicer. Trust me.” What kind of testimonial, he wants to know, speaks of the honoree without any mention of character, without any affection? He hates that she won’t admit to an honest reading of the text.

“But can’t you see the bigger picture? This whole thing is a testament to you. A huge honor!” She adjusts her reading glasses and points. “Here, in Jim Blackwell’s dedication, it says that the university’s been able to attract top students because of your reputation. That’s gratifying, isn’t it?”

“Okay, sure, maybe there’s a tiny bit of veneration for my academic achievements, but the only emotion expressed by my former students is one of joy: they’re tickled pink that they’ve moved on and are now far away from me. *Thank god we don’t have to sit in class or get our work reviewed by him anymore!*”

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“Would you stop, already?”

“Forget it!” He snaps, frustration growing. They’ve been together more than 50 years, and she’s always trying to whitewash slights against him. He’d feel better if she would just grant his indignation some legitimacy. “I’m sick of talking about this with someone who can’t understand!” Not that he has anyone else to talk to. He doesn’t want to be around anyone right now, even her – especially her. He grabs his car keys and bangs out the front door.

“Where are you going?” Molly calls. He trudges down the driveway, waving her off. The oppressive August humidity gives the Berkshires air a stiff, suffocating quality. “Fine. Be that way!”

He slams the car door and turns on the A/C at full blast, starting to drive without any destination in mind. His favorite spot on the campus? The library? He can’t face Peter yet. Or Marcella, that obtuse grad student, who’d seen the dedications and failed to mention anything. He drives along Route 7 for a few minutes with half a mind to drive all the way up to Williamstown to see his grandson or just sit in a shady spot gazing up at Mount Greylock, but it’s too damn hot. Stopped at a traffic light, he notices the navy and white gym bag on the floor of the passenger side that he’d forgotten to bring inside yesterday. His bathing trunks and towel will be a bit damp, but a swim will do him good.

The façade of the Jewish Community Center is a diamond lattice grid meant to look like a repeating Star of David, though in Jeremiah’s mind it resembles an egg carton. Six- and seven-year-olds from Camp JCC race past Jeremiah, their counselors trailing behind and

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admonishing them not to run in the halls. The building buzzes with activity; the walls are decorated with pictures from nursery school graduation and recent swim team meets. A photography exhibit of Buddy Glantz’s recent charity mission to Eritrea is on display in the main foyer. The bulletin board features upcoming activities and events: a Holocaust film screening, a volunteer trip to New Orleans to help rebuild after Hurricane Katrina, the usual flyers advertising tours to Israel.

The tiles in the men’s locker room are lizard-like, pukish green and scaly, but Jeremiah doesn’t mind. He welcomes the familiar, comforting odors of mildew and body sweat. He lets out an animal-like yelp, “aaauugh,” and changes into his trunks. A younger man, post-workout, casts a questioning glance in his direction, as if to ask after Jeremiah’s welfare, but he waves him off. “Fine, I’m fine. Terrific, in fact.”

This is not strictly true. On any given day Jeremiah experiences at least three or more minor physical annoyances, some causes for concern and others mildly irritating. Today’s aggravations included pain in the back of his knee and a drop of water stuck in his ear since yesterday’s swim. He’d tried to extract it with a Q-tip, but no matter how much he stretched his neck to one side and thumped the opposite ear, the water remains, sloshing around, taunting him. *Enough already with the self-pity*, some inner voice tells him when he starts to feel sorry for himself. *You swim 50 laps, several times a week. Not bad for an old man.* Is this his father talking, or himself? He’s never sure.

Thank goodness for the water, some laps in the pool. As he strokes, images of the black faces from Buddy’s pictures surface in his mind. He’s always donated to Buddy’s causes, but he’s never himself taken off a full week to donate his time to a charity

mission. His thoughts swirl to the Festschrift, but somewhere along his ninth lap he starts to rationalize to himself that the dedications don't matter. He'd like to believe Molly – that it's just a case of him being too sensitive – but he's not sure he can trust her instincts on this. She's never fully grasped the pressures and politics of academia.

By lap 32, his attitude is “screw ‘em!” He allows his mind to run through his professional triumphs: how it felt – all those years ago – to get word that his first academic article was accepted for publication. Seven books written by him and three more he'd edited – nearly all receiving favorable reviews from his peers. And, despite the little quirks and nagging things about his wife he could have done without, he was fully aware that he'd married a gem. Not to mention his two children and five grandchildren; most credit to Molly, of course, but he'd had a hand in raising them, hadn't he?

Jeremiah emerges from the pool transformed, and makes a short stop in the locker room before heading to the *schvitz*. He loves sweating out his toxins in the wet sauna, shaving cream dripping down his face. He takes a seat and senses pressure in his ear; terrific, he's now got two water-logged ears. He bends his neck to one side and thumps his ear to extract the water, much to the amusement of Herb Cohen and Buddy Glantz. They are 10 years his junior, *schvitzing* after their weekly squash game. He's never seen one without the other; they've been best friends since childhood. He wonders what it would be like to have a best friend for 60 years, or even 20. When he'd had a regular racquetball partner, they'd rarely socialized off the court.

“Q-tips, Jeremiah,” Herb says.

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“Never mind!” Jeremiah waves them off. “Nice pictures, by the way. I mean from your trip to Ethiopia.”

“Eritrea,” Buddy corrects.

He hopes they can’t see the flush creeping up his neck: a professor of international political economy should remember his countries! “Right, that’s what I meant.”

“A fantastic experience.” Buddy reports that he and his wife are headed New Orleans soon. A regular *tzadik*, this Buddy. Again the thought niggles at Jeremiah: yes, he gives charity to a number of worthy causes every year, but what of other good deeds? He resolves to take a closer look at those flyers in the foyer of the JCC. Of course, as a retired dentist, Buddy has a lot to offer some communities. What use can an old political science professor be to a war-torn / natural disaster / impoverished area?

“Power to you, Buddy,” he says, getting up to leave.

He tilts his head in one last effort to rid his ear of the water and again they say, in unison, “Q-tips!”

On the day of the book reception – Molly hadn’t given him a choice – Jeremiah grits his teeth and dons a lightweight sports jacket and slacks. He combs the thinning strands of white hair on the top of his head as well as the thicker curls in the back. “It’s a bad idea,” he says, warning his wife “No one’s going to come.”

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Molly takes his hand and kisses it. She looks lovely in a pale yellow summer sweater and floral skirt. Her hair is done for the occasion. “Come on, this is going to be nice. They’re honoring you, and your book.” She speaks as if he’s an unpopular teenager, a mother encouraging her son to make more of an effort in social situations. “You can do this.”

His gut tells him otherwise, but somehow he allows her to take his arm and lead him out of the house to the car. His mind is numb for the 10 minute drive to campus. Save four or five cars, the parking lot behind Dalton Faculty House is empty. He winces. “Let’s get this over with.”

Molly rummages in her oversized handbag and produces a boutonniere.

“Oh, for God’s sake!”

“Shhh. You’ll be fine.” She pins to his jacket.

Inside, he’s vindicated: no one attends book receptions. Certainly not one planned with the spectacularly bad timing of a Sunday afternoon in mid-August, when people are on vacation. But here is Jim, his department chair, along with the department assistant, and two younger faculty members, not yet tenured. Peter and another editor from the university press munch on canapés and mini-cucumber sandwiches. Two waiters from the dining service stand with their hands folded behind their backs, ready to serve.

They’d invited a dozen couples, but as Jeremiah glances around the room he sees only four friends: three of Molly’s plus the on-again, off-again companion of one of them, a man Jeremiah’s only met in passing. The other husbands are probably out playing

golf. A notion, previously skimmed over and ignored, hits him with terrific force: “their” friends are Molly’s. A wave of exhaustion sweeps over Jeremiah, and he scans the room for a comfortable chair. He cannot think of one dear friend who is more connected to *him* than to his *wife*. When was the last time he had a conversation of personal significance with any of the men in their circle? Sure, he can bluster about politics and the economy, boast about children and grandchildren and talk baseball, but he can’t recall the last time anyone has sought out his advice on a personal matter. His son, perhaps. One or two of his graduate students over the years, but these were research complications or thesis-writing blocks.

Jeremiah files through the names of men he’d been close with at one time or another: some have died or moved away, but he can’t blame everything on death or distance. His former friends include Phil and Sam Cohen, brothers whom he genuinely likes but whose wives he’d managed to offend on separate occasions. Raleigh Fox, his old colleague from DC, but he’d messed that up in his typical, blundering way decades prior. At times like this, Jeremiah feels the loss of his brother as an acute, stabbing pain, as if it had happened in the recent past instead of 60 years ago.

Molly chats with each person, thanking them for coming, though the slight crease in her forehead indicates that she, too, is anxious. She brings him a plate from the dessert table with mint brownies and a cinnamon pastry. There is food for 50 but he counts a dozen people. “Whose brilliant idea was this,” he whispers to her. “To have a book reception in the middle of August?”

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“Think positive!” She shushes him, but even the gooey sweetness of the sticky bun he pops into his mouth does not alleviate his dejection.

Hannah arrives with her husband and son, and Jeremiah brightens a bit. He greets his daughter with an embrace, shakes Tom’s hand, and cups Benjamin’s face in between his hands, planting a kiss on both cheeks. At 16, Ben towers over him. A good boy, his grandson, despite his unhealthy obsession with video games.

“Well,” Hannah says, biting into a mini sandwich and looking around. “These are tasty.”

“I *told* your mother we should cancel the whole thing,” he whispers. “Can I just get up there and say, ‘thanks for coming, enjoy the food, I’ve got to run now?’”

“No, you cannot,” she says. “Smile and try to be gracious.”

He grunts. A few more people file in – colleagues from the history and economics departments, the dean of academic affairs. The room is a third full.

Sunlight filters through the large bay window. Jeremiah can see a few summer students – orientation leaders who’d moved in mid-August – lounging on the grassy mound called College Hill. They wear tank tops and flip-flops, reading books or fiddling with their mobile phones. He feels a pang of irritation that anyone should be so relaxed and carefree.

Jim Blackwell clanks his fork on a glass. He welcomes everyone and congratulates Jeremiah and the university press on the book’s publication. Peter speaks next, saying what a pleasure it’s been to recruit and edit the essays in the volume, how

he’s enjoyed learning new facets of the international political economy, and how working on a Festschrift is always a privilege. Jeremiah is no longer listening, all he hears is “wah, wah, wah,” like the teacher’s voice in the after-school Peanuts specials.

Someone nudges Jeremiah towards the front of the room. Despite a sickening, nauseous sensation in his stomach, his legs obey. His mouth is dry and he motions for Hannah to bring him water. He glances at the small crowd, now close to 20. “I kind of figured nobody would show up, so I didn’t really prepare any remarks.” This is not true; inside his jacket pocket are five single-spaced pages of musing on the international political economy. “Thank you all for coming. Thanks to Peter, my editor, and to Marcella, my research assistant. Where are you, Marcella?” He doesn’t see her. “I guess she had other plans.” One of Molly’s friends emits a nervous titter. He clears his throat and tries to continue. “It’s funny to see a thing like this out in print. I mean, who’s going to read it?”

Peter’s face turns pale. Molly’s eyes are urging him to *do something, to say something*, but he can’t understand her meaning.

“Sorry. I really am...” he searches for the words, coughing into his hand. “I am very honored. And I probably could give a synopsis of some of the conclusions in the book. But if you want to know what they are, you’ll have to buy it.” He looks at Peter triumphantly. “That way we’ll have at least a few sales. Ha, ha.”

His forehead is slick with sweat and his mind goes blank. He can’t seem to form a single intelligent thought. “I think the only one who wants to be here less than me is my grandson.” At hearing his name, Ben goes wide-eyed, his face flushes red. “Ben, whadya

say we skip out of here and head over to O’Sullivan’s? Whoops. I forgot, you’re not allowed in there.” His attempts at humor fall flat; he can’t control his mouth, it seems. “Sorry, I guess I’m just a little *fakleempt*. That’s Yiddish for ‘overcome.’ I actually haven’t had a thing to drink, though I probably should have.”

Molly is at his side, whispering in his ear, and he holds up a finger to the crowd. “Just say thank you and how much this means to you, and then goodbye. That’s it,” she says.

He ignores her. “My wife is reminding me that no one wants to hear from a has-been professor. Anyway, when I decided to go into this field, something like 50 years ago, it wasn’t even really a field. I was helped along the way by many scholars. Triffin, for example. I hope we’ve made a difference in people’s understanding about the complexities of political and economic power and the way they interrelate. Of course,” he paused, “it’s too bad the guys in Washington don’t get it.” He cringes at the futility. “Anyway, who gives a damn, right?”

Nervous laughter, but he soldiers onward.

“To tell you the truth, lately I’ve been wondering if we political economists make one bit of difference.” His voice waivers. His entire career dedicated to the field. And now he sees his wasted potential. Has he saved a life? Alleviated anyone’s suffering or done one bit of good? He thinks of Buddy the dentist, going off to provide care wherever he can. He feels faint and glances around for something to hold onto. There is no podium. Molly stands by his side, and he thrusts his arm around her for support. She nearly

stumbles as he leans his weight on hers. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees her blinking, the way she does when she’s trying to hold back tears.

“Anyway, I could go on, but never mind. Thank you to my lovely wife and family for putting up with me. Thank you all for coming. And now I think I really could use a drink.” Everyone is silent. “Dismissed,” he says, a bit too aggressively, like his old grammar school principal. “Dismissed! Scram! Enjoy the food.”

Molly takes him by the arm and leads him over to a sofa with floral cushions. She’s taking shallow breaths, near hysteria. He feels bad for her; he’d like to run away, far away from here.

“Tell your friends I’m sorry,” Jeremiah mumbles. She and Hannah huddle around him, with his son-in-law and Ben a step behind.

“Our friends,” Molly corrects. “Maybe you were right – this was a bad idea.”

“Don’t say I didn’t tell you so.”

“I made him come,” Molly says, close to tears again.

“Mom,” Hannah says softly. “Keep it together. He’s just having a bad day.”

Wasn’t he entitled to a bad day sometimes? He has a ready list of gripes about his life. *No*, the rational side of his brain fights back. *You weren’t abused as a child. You have a dedicated wife. A daughter, smart and accomplished, and a son, though far away in California, who’s turned out alright.* What’s the matter with him? His father’s voice again: *A life with more blessings, you couldn’t have asked! He wants more, yet!* He hangs his head in shame, listening to this battle, his intellect on one side and his jumble of

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emotions on the other. To be in the spotlight brings to surface all the old fears, the anxiety of being called out as a fraud, like the prophet in the real Book of Jeremiah.

Molly mumbles something to Hannah and Tom about helping Jeremiah to the car, but at that moment the waiter wheels out a cake and everyone starts singing “Happy Birthday.” He’d forgotten that Molly had planned this as a belated birthday celebration. He draws a deep breath, forcing a smile. The room, by now, is half full, and he glances around at the people who’ve come to honor him. An image flashes in his mind and for a second he sees everyone holding paper cutouts of his own face in front of their own. Like that John Malkovich movie. A comical notion. Being Jeremiah Gerstler. His days have not been the stuff of high action, supreme sacrifices, or major tragedy.

“Oh, brother,” he says. “Ben, come over here.” He leans on Ben’s arm, hoisting himself off the sofa, and blows out the candles. Thankfully there are not 80 of them. In the slight lightheadedness that results from his exhalation, a thought crystalizes. He closes his eyes and tries to recall the details of the flyer. He hopes his family won’t dismiss him as foolish.

“Dad?” Hannah asks. “Do you want to go?”

He shakes his head. He’s beginning to feel more like himself, the heavy mood lifting. “I’m okay.” He sits back down and gathers his family to him.

“Listen. Don’t tell Peter this, but this whole Festschrift thing and the reception...it’s nice. But maybe I should have said no.”

They protest but he shushes them. "I just had an idea. A revelation, if you will, of something I need to do. Or maybe not *need*, that's not the right word. Something I should do, or at least try." He explains about the trip to rebuild New Orleans. Volunteers of all ages needed for tasks both physical and non-physical. "There's library work, cataloging, mending books. Stuff like that. And I was thinking: maybe Ben could come with me."

Hannah's mouth drops open, and Ben says with excitement, "Are you serious?" His grandson has never been to New Orleans. "Nice!" He looks to his parents for approval. "Can I go?"

"Um. We'll talk about it." For once, his daughter is speechless.

Molly shakes her head and gives a little laugh. "If that's what you really want, dear." He can see from the look on her face, and Hannah's too, that they're thinking: there he goes again, Mr. Impulsive. But this is the flip side of impulsive, the sunny quality. Madcap decisions turning out well. Other memories of helping people come back to him now. As a boy during the Depression, he'd convinced his mother to bake cakes for the local slop house. Today it would be called a soup kitchen. If he delves into the far corners of his memory, he is sure he can come up with a few more examples. He feels his father standing behind him, proud and beaming, ready to place a kiss on his forehead.

"Maybe you'll come with us, Mol."

"I'll have to think about it."

"Good. Then it's settled." Even though, he knows, of course, that it wasn't. He'll need to coax Hannah into the idea of letting Ben come with him. And he knows that one

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week of volunteering does not make up for a lifetime of not. But for the moment, he feels youthful again, energized by his idea. He rises from the couch, this time without the assistance of Ben’s strong hand, and ambles over to the waiters serving the cake.

The chocolate icing doesn’t hold a candle to Molly’s but he savors the rush of sweetness in his mouth. He gulps down two cups of water, finds a napkin, and wipes his face clean of crumbs. He joins a group of colleagues standing in a small circle, and they each take a step back to make room.

“Actually I did prepare a little speech, but I decided not to bore this crowd with it.” They smile politely, as though they hadn’t all just witnessed his near breakdown. He knows they think he’s a relic from a past era, with his bowties and brown briefcase and lunches his wife still packs. But he’s not quite finished yet. To those standing nearby, he announces the trip with his grandson as if it’s been planned for months. If Hannah hears, he can count on his daughter – even in her annoyance – to give a private reprimand, not a public one. “You!” he calls to Ben, motioning him over and cuffing his shoulder playfully.

Intelligent thoughts and speech return. Jeremiah begins expounding on the domestic political economy; he might make this trip into something of a research project! He speaks with the feverish excitement of an adolescent about to embark on a journey. Perhaps the Festschrift is a testament to his career, but the Book of Jeremiah is still a work-in-progress. Can they see that? He keeps talking, even as circle around him dwindles, people drifting towards the dessert table and out of the room.